

Money will flow , despite RNC changes

By LIZ FEDOR, Star Tribune

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Hurricane Gustav has cast a somber tone over the Republican National Convention, but a truncated political events schedule appears unlikely to substantially alter the amount of money spent in the Twin Cities by convention participants.

An estimated 35,000 to 45,000 delegates, media members and others were expected to come to the Twin Cities metro area for the event.

"The people who are going to be at the convention are here or on their way," Carolyn Kirchgesler, president and CEO of the St. Paul Convention and Visitors Authority, said Sunday afternoon.

She added that community leaders had estimated that the convention would translate into a \$150 million to \$160 million economic impact on the Twin Cities.

Republican Party officials said Sunday afternoon that they would limit Monday's convention business to the bare essentials, but delegates need to remain in session this week until they nominate a presidential ticket.

It was unclear whether they will meet over four days because party leaders said they will make schedule decisions on a day-by-day basis.

For now, thousands of people attending the St. Paul convention are still here, paying for hotel rooms and meals and visiting shops across the Twin Cities.

"How much time the conventioners spend in the [Xcel Energy Center] depends on the decisions by the party," said Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak.

While they are here, Rybak said, they will be spending money at restaurants and other businesses during the Labor Day holiday weekend -- a period that is historically very slow for the local hospitality industry.

He said city and business leaders are focused on serving as hosts, such as showcasing the Mill City Museum and Guthrie Theater on Saturday night.

Entering the convention week, scores of parties and receptions were scheduled for delegates.

There wasn't an immediate rush Sunday to cancel social events in light of Hurricane Gustav's effect on the convention.

Instead, said Connie Nicholas, secretary of the Republican National Committee, she anticipates that many social gatherings will be used to raise money for victims of the hurricane.

"It's going to be something that all of us as Americans will have to pitch in and help," said Nicholas, who lives in Cando, N.D.

She sat on the site selection committee and supported the Twin Cities location because she said there were excellent facilities available for delegates and the news media.

She also said it was a good idea to "have our candidates launch the remainder of the campaign from the heartland."

On Sunday, Chris Healy, chairman of the Connecticut delegation, said his group canceled a Monday-night cruise on the Mississippi River. "We think it's important to respect what [Sen. John] McCain and the Republican National Committee are requesting by toning down our activities," he said.

However, at the Chambers Hotel in downtown Minneapolis, general manager Cliff Atkinson said the hotel has 20 special events scheduled this week and all hosts have reconfirmed their reservations.

Rybak said St. Paul and Minneapolis leaders were eager to attract the convention as part of their "More to Life" campaign, which is focused on branding the community on a national basis.

"To know us is to love us," Rybak said, and many first-time visitors have told him over the weekend that they want to return to the Twin Cities for another visit.

"As important as this [convention] week is, the value is played out over months and years," Rybak said.

Staff writer Emily Kaiser contributed to this reporter. Liz Fedor • 612-673-7709

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